United Nations A/57/320

General Assembly

Distr.: General
16 August 2002

Original: English

Fifty-seventh session
Item 21 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

Emergency response to disasters

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

Following the devastating earthquakes that hit Greece and Turkey in 1999, the Governments of the two countries agreed to establish cooperation in disaster response. In November 2001, Greece and Turkey signed a bilateral protocol to establish a joint standby disaster response unit comprising personnel drawn from governmental and non-governmental organizations of both countries. The United Nations, through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has been assisting in working out the arrangements for the functioning of the joint unit. A memorandum of understanding between the Governments of Greece and Turkey and the United Nations is being finalized to define the mechanism and the procedures required for the effective mobilization and deployment of the joint unit in providing timely humanitarian assistance to populations affected by sudden onset natural disasters.

The General Assembly, in its resolutions 54/30 and 56/99, noted with satisfaction the decision taken by the Governments of Greece and Turkey to establish such a joint unit to reinforce and expand existing standby arrangements of the United Nations system, and urged the international community to further cooperate in humanitarian assistance.

* A/57/150.

** The present report was submitted on 15 August after extensive consultations with the relevant United Nations partners involved in its finalization.

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I. Introduction

1. In 1999, Greece and Turkey were hit by three devastating earthquakes, which killed more than 20,000 persons and resulted in significant destruction of infrastructure. The two Governments rendered mutual assistance and, in the wake of these earthquakes, also agreed to establish a joint standby disaster response unit.

2. On 22 November 1999, at its fifty-fourth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 54/30, in which it expressed its deep sorrow at the loss of lives and devastation caused by earthquakes in Greece and Turkey; urged the international community to further cooperate in humanitarian assistance; and noted with satisfaction the decision of the Governments of Greece and Turkey to establish a joint standby disaster relief unit to reinforce and expand existing standby arrangement of the United Nations system. It also requested the Secretary-General, through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat, to formulate the modalities for the utilization of the standby disaster relief unit by the relevant agencies of the United Nations system.

3. On 14 December 2001, at its fifty-sixth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 56/99, in which it noted with satisfaction the progress achieved by the Governments of Greece and Turkey, in cooperation with the United Nations, on the establishment of a "joint Hellenic-Turkish standby disaster response unit". It also requested the Secretary-General to continue work on the modalities for the utilization of the standby disaster relief unit by the United Nations system and requested him to report to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session on the progress made in that regard.

4. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 5 of General Assembly resolution 56/99.

II. Protocol between Greece and Turkey

5. On 8 November 2001, as a result of discussions that took place in Ankara, Athens and Geneva, the Governments of Greece and Turkey signed a Protocol establishing a joint standby disaster response unit. The aim of the unit is to increase the collective capacity of the two countries to provide timely and effective humanitarian assistance to populations affected by sudden onset natural disasters. At the request of the two Governments, the United Nations provided technical expertise on the formulation of the operational elements referred to in the text of the Protocol and its annex. Moreover, in accordance with the provisions of paragraph 28 of the annex to General Assembly resolution 46/182 of 19 December 1991, and those of the Protocol signed by both Governments, the joint standby disaster response unit will be working in coordination with the United Nations to reinforce and expand the existing disaster response standby arrangements of the United Nations system.

6. The joint unit will consist of some 40 people from governmental and non-governmental institutions of each country. It will comprise personnel for urban search and rescue, emergency medical care and technical expertise, including engineering and geosciences.

7. To manage the joint unit, the two Governments also agreed to establish a Coordinating Committee with equal membership from each party, to be chaired by the parties on an annually rotating basis, which will oversee all administrative, financial and operational aspects of cooperation between the parties. The United Nations will be invited to attend the meetings of the Coordinating Committee, as required, to discuss those issues relevant to training, preparedness and international cooperation.

8. The national contingents allocated to the joint standby disaster response unit will remain at their permanent home base locations. They will come together for exercises and training activities, for which they will have jointly prepared programmes, or for deployment to disaster affected zones. The units will be configured according to the requirements of the specific deployment or exercise/training. Each component of the joint unit will be ready to be transported to the disaster zone within eight hours of being alerted.

9. The joint unit will work closely with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in order to ensure its cooperation with international disaster response mechanisms, including the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination Team, the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

(ISDR) and the United Nations Programme on the Use of Military and Civil Defence Assets in disaster relief.

III. Cooperation with the United Nations

10. In order to further develop cooperation arrangements between the United Nations and the joint standby disaster response unit in the field of international humanitarian assistance in case of sudden onset natural disasters, and to fulfil the objectives of the United Nations with regard to coordination and mobilization of humanitarian emergency assistance, a memorandum of understanding between Greece, Turkey and the United Nations is being finalized. The objective of the memorandum is to ensure a coordinated and effective deployment of the joint unit within existing international disaster response mechanisms.

11. The memorandum of understanding will provide for the deployment of the joint unit in disaster affected countries in three circumstances: under the authority of the United Nations; as a part of an international response; or on a separate basis, as required. When operating under the authority of the United Nations, the personnel of the joint unit will hold the status of experts of the United Nations.

12. Greece, Turkey and the United Nations will share information on emergencies for the purpose of preparing for and facilitating international humanitarian emergency operations on a coordinated basis. When necessary, the United Nations will send a request to the joint unit with specifications regarding requirements and other necessary details. At the end of each joint project, the United Nations and the Governments of Greece and Turkey shall jointly conduct an evaluation of the activities of the personnel of the joint unit.

13. At present, the two Governments and the United Nations are planning for the participation of experts from the joint unit in a major international search and rescue exercise, being organized by the Government of Italy in Sicily in March 2003.

14. The training of the joint unit members and its engagement in international humanitarian emergency operation will have no financial implications for the programme budget of the United Nations.

IV. Observations

15. The cooperation between the United Nations and the Governments of Greece and Turkey is an example of integrated efforts in international disaster response preparedness. In line with recommendations of the Fribourg Forum,[1] the United Nations stands ready to support Member States in developing cooperative arrangements aimed at ensuring quick and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations.

16. As soon as the final text of the memorandum of understanding between the Governments of Greece and Turkey and the United Nations has been finalized, all parties will organize its formal signature and it will be submitted to the Parliaments of Greece and Turkey for their endorsement.

Notes

[1] The Fribourg Forum took place in June 2000. A United Nations-sponsored initiative, it launched a continuing dialogue between European countries and international and regional organizations to enhance coherence and complementarity in the humanitarian aspects of crisis management.